

Jesse Knight Set Record As Provo Philanthropist

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made his first big strike there in 1896.

As his fortune grew he branched out into many endeavors — power plants, huge cattle ranches, farms, the old Knight Woolen Mills, the Knight Trust and Savings Company (Now the First Security Bank), the Knight Coal Company, the Spring Canyon Coal Company, sugar factories (two of them), and mining interests in three states.

He left his mark on Canada in many ways—the most lasting of which survives today and perhaps always will, the community of Raymond in the province of Alberta, named after his son. His ranching and farming holdings in that vicinity, were at one time vast.

Cattle Industry

His South American land holdings in the South American country of Colombia involved the cattle industry.

How much was he worth at his peak? Probably no one knows, and it was nobody's business but his. He was an expander in the classic sense, and as he acquired a lot he owed a lot. So how much he was worth doesn't particularly matter. Nor does it matter that his fortune declined in his later years, a decline hastened by the post-war depression of World War I.

What does matter is what he did with his money.

He gave thousands and thousands of dollars to Brigham Young University — starting with \$1000 in 1898 toward the College Building on the lower campus, an amount that was to be a mere drop in the bucket as time went on. In 1901 he gave \$15,000 toward erection of the Training School Building (remember the old Men's Gym on the top floor?) and that was a lot of money in those days. You might say he "conned" a well-heeled associate of his into making a \$5000 contribution, matching it with another of his own. The Knight family paid for fully half of the \$130,000 cost of the classic Maeser Memorial, a landmark today on the upper campus. Jesse and his beloved wife, Amanda, came up with \$41,000, and virtually every one of their children and their wives or husbands contributed from \$3000 to \$6000 each. Total effort of the Knight family was \$65,000. And if you wonder how they built that structure for \$130,000—it was finished in 1911.

Not content with that, Uncle Jesse built the college a blacksmith shop when it needed one, and made it several gifts which developed in vastly profitable endowments—including land on what was then Provo Bench and the Blue Bench Irrigation Project stock in the Uintah Basin, the latter a particularly valuable endowment.

It has been said, and truthfully so, that Abraham O. Smoot saved Brigham Young

Academy in the early days when it would have perished without his financial support. The school would probably have survived without Jesse Knight, but its growth would have been greatly hampered. Because whenever it really needed money, Jesse was usually there to either donate it or talk a rich friend into helping.

And without going into a story which is too long to tell here, Jesse Knight, a devout member of the LDS Church, once "saved the credit of the Mormon Church," according to a chapter in the biography by his son. Printed in the little book is a grateful letter signed by Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant, dated Sept. 3, 1898; another, undated, signed by Wilford Woodruff, and another of Feb. 15, 1923, signed by Heber J. Grant, all thanking him for money advanced when financial emergencies were great.

Town Without Saloon

His own "company town" of Knightsville in the Tintic area, long since vanished, is famous as perhaps the only mining town in the West without a saloon. What didn't make the history books was the fact that he paid his men more than anyone else so they could have the Sabbath Day off and attend church—a custom not too widely held in the West of that day. The extra wages made up for the lost day's work each week.

His daughter speaks of him as if it were only yesterday.

"He believed in free agency," she said. "He believed in letting us make our own decisions and our own mistakes after he had given us all the counsel he could. And he never berated us for a mistake. My brother Raymond once didn't do so good in a cattle deal, and Father cautioned us all not to say anything to him. I once wanted to go to a dance at the old Mozart. Father told me he would rather I didn't. I went anyway. And believe me, I was never so miserable in my life, because I knew how he felt. But he let me go."

(The old Mozart was where the Utahna once was and where the post office now is. It was considered quite gay, and even a bit wicked in the old days and was off-limits, even then, for Brigham Young University students.)

There is a story I remember from the late George W. Fitzroy which tells pretty well how Jesse Knight felt about his community, and about people. George Fitzroy had just come to Provo from the East, and was standing on Center Street one day looking about as lonely as he felt.

A big man on a magnificent white horse rode up to him and dismounted. "I'm Jesse Knight," he said genially, pumping the stranger's hand, and proceeded to get acquainted.

George Fitzroy said he never felt lonely in Provo again.



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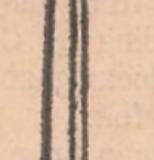
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